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Bridging East and West:
The Far-Reaching Contribution by the Great Mindfulness Meditation Master
of Myanmar Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada (1868–1955)

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One of the most widely practised mindfulness meditation techniques which have taken the imagination of the Western world by storm was “developed” by Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada of Myanmar and “popularised” by two generations of his students: Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), also of Myanmar, and Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994), originally of Germany. On the centenary celebrations of the founding of the Mula Mingun Meditation Centre in Thaton where Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw himself was based and offered his far-reaching meditation method, this short note, albeit indefensibly brief, appraises how this bridging of East and West has taken place.

In the last twenty-five years, *Satipatthana*, now widely known as mindfulness meditation practice, has become very popular as a form of medical intervention among some medical scientists, neurologists and psychologists. Articles and books in English on mindfulness begin to appear from the early 1980s: while the scientist communities worldwide publish only one paper on the subject in 1982, the number jumps to a three digit in less than a decade: at least 228 papers/books in 1990. The trend goes on ever since mainly among western scientists with 353 papers and books published in 2000, 397 in 2011 and 477 in 2012.

The figures indicate that the benefit of the *Satipatthana* approach to mind training has been scientifically well proven. One may browse Google and glance at some related (3)²⁵ academic articles available on the internet. “*Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density*”, is the title of one such article with an obvious indication of the benefits of mindfulness on the brain. This particular report was co-authored by Britta K. Hölzel, James Carmody, Mark Vangel, Christina Congleton, Sita M. Yerramsetti, Tim Gard, Sara W. Lazar of Massachusetts General Hospital, in the internationally acclaimed journal, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* (2011; 191 (1): 36).²⁶ “*Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation*”, is how another title of an article, also jointly presented, by many researchers reads.²⁷ A Google search I make today, 16th July 2014, for only 0.05 seconds yields 101 results on mindfulness by leading western scientists.ⁱⁱⁱ Many other scholarly and research based book titles also speak for themselves on the popularity of mindfulness practice. “*Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: An unfolding dialogue*” (ed.) by Jeremy D. Safran (2003); *Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches: Clinician's Guide to Evidence Base and Applications* (ed.) by Ruth A. Baer (2006); *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* by Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, John D. Teasdal (2007); “*Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*” by Rick Hanson (PhD) and Richard Mendius, MD (2009) and *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (2011) by Owen Flanagan of MIT, USA are some of those titles easily available to many.

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Since the early 1980s, the mindfulness-based insight meditation, *Satipatthana*, has been one of the fastest growing Buddhist meditation practice in the West, noticeably in the United States. The movement has been led by teachers who have been trained in Myanmar such as Jack Kornfield PhD and Joseph Goldstein, and their technique was mainly centred on Mahasi Sayadaw's practice. In 1976 Kornfield and Goldstein, along with Sharon Salzberg and Jacqueline Schwartz, all of whom have studied with Mahasi Sayadaw or his pupil Sayadaw U Pandita, founded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. It was to this centre that Mahasi Sayadaw himself was invited to teach in 1979.

Today, western clinical psychologists and scientists widely employ in their work one of the many crucial aspects of mindfulness, namely 'nonjudgmental' observation, that is free from reacting to thoughts, feelings, etc.. Bishop *et al.* (2004: 232) summarize several scholars' understanding of mindfulness as follows:

Mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1998; Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999, 2000; Teasdale, 1999b; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). In a state of mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity.

Indeed, most prominent among those researchers, Prof. Kabat-Zinn (1994: 4), defines mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally'. In their research on mindfulness meditation in clinical practice, Salmon *et al.* (2004: 436) say: 'As soon as judgments, or any other form of cognitive-based commentary, become intertwined with the flow of mental events, we are "out of the moment"...', and emphasize 'being able to detach from one's thoughts and making them objects of simple attention ...thoughts are treated just like any other sensation ...rather than as special events to which we ascribe particular significance'.

Such an understanding can be traced to a popular Theravāda Buddhist idea of mindfulness as articulated by Nyanaponika Thera (*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 1954: 30):

Mindfulness, in its specific aspect of Bare Attention ... It is called 'bare', because it attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind which, for Buddhist thought, constitutes the sixth sense. When attending to the sixfold sense impressions, attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or by mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc), judgement or reflection.

In my own little booklet *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy* (Penang: 1999) I attempt to explain non-judgemental mindfulness quoting the section on citta (cittanupassana) of the Satipatthana-sutta:

In Vipassana meditation, the Buddha goes as far as to say wandering mind and concentrated mind are equally valuable as meditative objects... Just pay bare attention to them and do not judge. Do not say the wandering mind is bad or the concentrated mind is good. Make no value judgement. (52-53)

Nowadays, even international public broadcasting corporations have taken up the interest on mindfulness. One of the BBC Television reports, for example, talks about how

mindfulness meditation has become a buzz word in recent year reducing stress, depression

and even chronic pain.^{iv} The CNN also has the title of one of its news items as “*Can mindfulness help manage pain and mental illness?*”^v The CNN acknowledges that “the idea of mindfulness has come from Buddhism”.

Besides, a sizeable number of the American Congress members as well as their British counterparts have practised mindfulness and have become instrumental in introducing the practice to schools, workplace as well as law establishments in their countries. The internet giant, Google, even provides mindfulness practice for its staff, under the guidance of many well known teachers; many of the sessions are made available on YouTube.^{vi}

There are now many medical intervention programmes based on mindfulness. Prominent among them are MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) by Jon Kabat-Zinn of MIT, USA and MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) by medics and clinical psychologists from MIT, Oxford, Cambridge and Toronto Universities. There are also other programmes such as Mindfulness-Based Emotion Focused Therapy (MBEFT) (by Prof. Padmasiri de Silva of Monash University) and Mindfulness-Based Cancer Recovery and Mindfulness-Based Meditation-Related Pain Relief by others.

Before the scientists have taken it up, mindfulness meditation practice as we know it now was principally and initially promoted in the English speaking world by two well known Theravada masters. One was a German Buddhist scholar and advanced meditator, Venerable Nyanaponika Thera (1901 – 1994), who wrote in his famous book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (first published in 1954 by the Buddhist Publication society, Kandy, Sri Lanka) how the *Satipatthana* meditation practice is taught by Mahasi Sayadaw (1904 – 1982) and his teacher, Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada (1868–1955). Nyanaponika Thera himself was a student of Mahasi Sayadaw. The other master to have done so much to spread mindfulness meditation in the West was, of course, none other than Mahasi Sayadaw himself who visited USA and Europe in 1979 spending one hundred and eighteen days teaching the *Satipatthana-sutta* based mindfulness meditation techniques.

In brief, while a Buddhist meditation technique may be justifiably based on any of the many meditation related suttas, this popular mindfulness meditation practice as we know it today is based in the *Satipatthana-sutta* of the Majjhima-nikaya (also in the Digha-nikaya); it is the insight meditation practice trend that was first developed by the Most Venerable Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada and popularized by one of his most able students, the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw.

The Venerable Nyanaponika Thera, whom I had the fortune to meet while studying in Sri Lanka, describes this mindfulness based insight meditation which he calls “the New Burmese Method” as follows:

It was at the beginning of this century that a Burmese monk, U Narada by name, bent on actual realization of the teachings he had learnt, was eagerly searching for a system of meditation offering a direct access to the Highest Goal, without encumbrance by accessories. Wandering through the country, he met many who were given to strict meditative practice, but he could not obtain guidance satisfactory to him. In the course of his quest, coming to the famous meditation-caves in the hills of Sagaing in Upper Burma, he met a monk who was reputed to have entered upon those lofty Paths of Sanctitude (ariya-magga) where the final achievement of Liberation is assured. When the Venerable U Narada put his question to him, he was asked in return: 'Why are you searching outside of the Master's word? Has not the Only Way, Satipatthana, been proclaimed by Him?'

U Narada took up this indication. Studying again the text and its traditional exposition, reflecting deeply on it, and entering energetically upon its practice, he finally came to understand its salient features. The results achieved in his own practice convinced him that he had found what he was searching for: a clear-cut and effective method of training the mind for highest realization. From his own experience he developed the principles and the details of the practice which formed the basis for those who followed him as his direct or indirect disciples. In order to give a name to the Venerable U Narada's method of training in which the principles of Sattipattthana are applied in such a definite and radical way, we propose to call it here the Burmese Sattipattthana Method; not in the sense that it was a Burmese invention but because it was in Burma that the practice of that ancient Way had been so ably and energetically revived.^{vii}

For myself, I was ordained in one of the branch monasteries of Mahasi in Shan State and have for sometime centred my own humble practice on the *Satipatthana-sutta* as developed by Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw. My father was a life-long practitioner in the Mahasi vipassana *Satipatthana* meditation tradition; in his later years he spent some four months a year meditating in the Mahasi centre in my hometown, Laikha; courageously and mindfully he faced an illness in his final days with continued observation of sensation, thought and emotion; he indicated he knew the day he would die, and he actually did it on that day: he had many family members, friends and colleagues gathering one by one, saying goodbye to them from the time before dawn until mid morning when he lied down in front of the Buddha alter to take his last breath in December 1995. My mother was a devoted practitioner in the Mingun vipassana tradition, also confronting the increasing pain of cirrhosis without morphine but with non-judgemental and continuous awareness of the pain itself for about five months in 2008. Both of my parents have enormously benefited from the *Satipatthana* meditation technique as developed by the Most Venerable Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada.

So, in a way it is out of profound personal and family gratitude that this humble and rather incomplete note on the Most Venerable Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Narada and his *Satipatthana* practice is attempted in order to honour this great meditation teacher whose practice tradition has helped to bridge the centuries-old mind science of the East and the modern evidence-based science of the West.

ⁱ (DOI: 10.1016/j.psychresns.2010.08.006).

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/01/110121144007.htm. accessed 16/7/2014.

ⁱⁱ Richard J. Davidson, PhD, Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, Jessica Schumacher, MS, Melissa Rosenkranz, BA, Daniel Muller, MD, PhD, Saki F. Santorelli, EDD, Ferris Urbanowski, MA, Anne Harrington, PhD, Katherine Bonus, MA, and John F. Sherindan, PHD.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?hl=en&gws_rd=ssl&um=1&ie=UTF-8&lr=&q=related:QmntnWFCpMVrcM:scholar.google.com/ⁱⁱⁱ.

^{iv} <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-16406814>. Accessed 16/7/2014.

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<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/11/16/mindfulness.therapy.meditation/index.html?iref=allsearch> h. (Nov 2010); <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/09/business/can-you-train-your-brain/index.html?iref=allsearch> (Oct. 2013).

^{vi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0V-sSzcjtFo> (Accessed 16/7/2014)

^{vii} *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (reprint, 1992: 95-95)